

Statement of Mr. Walz in Support of H.R. 5059, the Clay Hunt SAV Act

Chairman Miller, Ranking Member Michaud, thank you for your leadership and dedication to our nation's heroes. I am very grateful for the opportunity to tell you about a very important piece of legislation to help rid our communities of veteran suicide.

H.R. 5059, the Clay Hunt Suicide Prevention for American Veterans Act, is an example of how we get things right on Capitol Hill. The legislation is named in honor of Iraq and Afghanistan War Veteran and suicide prevention advocate, Clay Hunt. Clay epitomized what it meant to live a life of service, both in and out of uniform. He helped countless veterans overcome their demons but tragically took his own life in March of 2011. The legacy he left behind, however, will live on for generations to come.

The bill you see before you was the result of strong partnerships with our veteran service organizations, strong bipartisanship efforts here in Congress, and relentlessness shown by Clay's parents, to get this thing done. This bill is what you get when you have folks sitting around the table, trusting one another, and working together to get it right for our nation's veterans. I'd like to send a special note of thanks to two Air Force vets for helping get this thing done. Thanks go to Christine Hill from Chairman Miller's staff and Tony DeMarino from Ms. Duckworth's staff for their hard work.

Our premise for this bill was simple: suicide occurs because many vets return to their community and then disconnect from it. So, we wanted to create a bill that would get the communities involved and coordinated. We also knew it would be important to increase the capacity and efficiency of VA care to deal with over a million veterans returning from war.

Specifically, the bill:

1. Establishes a peer support and community outreach pilot program to assist transitioning servicemembers with accessing VA mental health care services.
2. Requires the VA to create a one-stop, interactive website to serve as a centralized source of information regarding all mental health services for veterans.
3. Addresses the shortage of mental health care professionals by authorizing the VA to conduct a student loan repayment pilot program aimed at recruiting and retaining psychiatrists.
4. Requires the DoD and National Guard to review the staffing requirements for Directors of Psychological Health in each state.
5. Requires a yearly evaluation, conducted by a third party, of all mental health care and suicide prevention practices and programs at the DoD and VA to find out what's working and what's not working and make recommendations to improve care.

6. Establishes a strategic relationship between the VA and the National Guard to facilitate a greater continuity of care between the National Guard and the VA.
7. Authorizes a Government Accountability Office (GAO) report on the transition of care for PTSD and TBI between the DoD and the VA.

One veteran lost to suicide is one too many. With many of our warriors returning from war, all too often our heroes return only to face a war of their own at home. While there is no bill that will completely end veteran suicide, this comprehensive, bipartisan measure is a step in the right direction. I'm proud to have worked with Chairman Miller, Rep. Duckworth, a combat veteran herself, IAVA, and the VFW to introduce this bipartisan, important legislation. And I urge my colleagues to support this measure so that we can pass it quickly into law. Thank you.